Reconstructing Arda: Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor

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Abstract
Discusses Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and how it was constructed from the materials later published in the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth*, in particular the version of "Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor" in the published *Silmarillion* compared with the source material given in *Morgoth's Ring*. The author finds intriguing patterns in what Christopher Tolkien used and did not use from the original material.

Additional Keywords
Although J.R.R. Tolkien is best known for having written *The Lord of the Rings* (and to a lesser extent, *The Hobbit*), *The Silmarillion* [*Silm.*] is arguably his most important work. He began working on the stories that provided the basis of what would become *The Silmarillion* in 1917, while he was fighting in World War I, and he continued revising them in some context or another throughout the rest of his life, until his death in 1973. These stories originally stemmed from two main sources: his interest in inventing languages, and his desire to create a mythology for England (*Letters* 144, 230-231). However, they eventually became the vehicle for his most profound reflections on such themes as death and immortality, and the perils of timeless beauty; pride and hubris, and the struggle between good and evil (as symbolized by the Silmarils, the holy jewels that alone preserved the “pure” Light, yet also generated so much of the strife described in these tales); and perhaps most importantly, the tension between fate and free will. Even more than *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* reflects the melding of Tolkien’s abiding Catholic faith with his deep knowledge of and respect for ancient pagan myth (and language).

Unfortunately, however, Tolkien never completed this work. He left behind a complex array of interrelated texts, none of which could be considered “finished.” In addition to the *Quenta Silmarillion* (the History of the Silmarils) itself, there were also closely related texts that were written in annal form (a short chronological record of the events of successive years, although they often were extended into longer narrative passages). There were also a number of essays, commentaries, and other works that further developed what became known as Tolkien’s legendarium, including extended prose and verse versions of the three “Great Tales” which formed the core of the mythology: the tales of Beren and

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1 This paper is an extract from *ARDA RECONSTRUCTED: The Creation of the Published Silmarillion*, due early 2009 from Lehigh University Press.
Lúthien, “The Fall of Gondolin,” and “The Children of Húrin.”2 These works were left in varying states of completion. The earlier portions of the narrative underwent a significant amount of revision after *The Lord of the Rings* was published in the mid-1950s, whereas some of the later portions were never updated after 1930, or even earlier. Moreover, towards the end of his life, Tolkien contemplated a vast reworking of many critical elements of his mythology, but he never carried through on this plan.

After Tolkien’s death, it was left to his son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien (for ease of reference, I will from here on refer to him as “Christopher,” while continuing to refer to his father as “Tolkien”), to attempt to publish *The Silmarillion*. The factors described above made that a particularly daunting and difficult task.

In most of the 12-volume work *The History of Middle-earth*, Christopher documents in amazing detail the development of the work of his father that would become *The Silmarillion* (four volumes trace the history of the creation of *The Lord of the Rings*). However, save for an occasional hint here and there, he mostly does not show the final step: his actual creation of the published work, with the assistance of Guy Gavriel Kay (who was then a graduate student but would later go on to become a successful fantasy author in his own right).

Many readers of *The Silmarillion* have developed the impression that it was essentially written by the editor from the author’s notes. Christopher himself calls this “a serious misapprehension to which my words have given rise” (*Book of Lost Tales, Vol.1* [BoLT 1] 6-7). Other readers make the assumption that they are basically reading what Tolkien himself wrote, with only minor editorial interference. This assumption is equally mistaken.

As Christopher states in the Foreword to *The War of the Jewels* [*WotJ*] (the second of the two volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* that covers the “later Silmarillion”), “the published work is not in any way a completion, but a construction devised out of the existing materials. Those materials are now made available [...] and with them a criticism of the ‘constructed’ *Silmarillion* becomes possible. I shall not enter into that question” (*WotJ* x). This paper is an attempt to “enter into that question” for one particular story: to document the major changes, omissions, and additions that were made to Tolkien’s work by Christopher (and Guy Kay) in preparing *The Silmarillion* for publication, and to trace how the disparate source materials were used to create what is in essence a composite work.

Anyone who has read *The Silmarillion* knows that “Arda” is the word Tolkien uses to designate the world in which his mythology plays out. Christopher—while using mostly his father’s own words—reconstructed his

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2 *The Children of Húrin* has, of course, now been published as a stand-alone volume.
father’s vision for the presentation of that mythology to fit his own image of how the work should appear. I wish to make clear, however, that none of the criticisms that I make should be taken as a sign that I have anything but the deepest admiration for Christopher Tolkien, and profound gratitude to him for the tireless work that he has done to make so much of his father’s incredible work accessible to the public. Needless to say, without that effort, this work would be impossible.

**Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor**

The sixth chapter of *The Silmarillion*, “Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor,” includes some of the most significant editorial changes made in the entire book. It presents examples of two of the most important types of changes: reductions in the roles played by female characters, and the excision of some of the philosophical speculations of the author. This chapter has a complicated history, reflecting the “second phase” in Tolkien’s later work on *The Silmarillion*. As Christopher points out, this new work saw his father moving in the direction of a “much fuller mode of narrative” that would expand the work back towards the level of detail in the original Book of Lost Tales (*Morgoth’s Ring* [MR] 142). Unfortunately, much of this “reexpansion” is not reflected in the published *Silmarillion*. Indeed, perhaps my largest complaint concerning Christopher’s work on this project is that he did not include the expanded story of Finwê and Míriel, as was his father’s clear intent.

One possible explanation for this is that Christopher felt that incorporating the “fuller mode of narrative” here would have contrasted too sharply with material that came before, which is not presented as fully. However, *The Silmarillion* as it is currently constituted is full of such contrasts. This is particularly evident with the stories of Beren and Lúthien and Tûrin Turambar, which are much more fully treated than anything around them. Another argument against including this material is that it veers into philosophical speculation, rather than strictly advancing the plot. However, this is an important part of Tolkien’s work, and should not be shied away from. *The Silmarillion* is no simple fantasy novel; it reflects the lifework of one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. These omissions have prevented a more complete appreciation and understanding of Tolkien’s work and his thought on the nature of pride, love, and, most of all, death.

Tracing the source material for this chapter is complicated. Much of the chapter comes from the “second-phase” text that Christopher labels “FM 4” (for “Fëanor and Míriel 4”), which was the fourth and final version of the story of Finwê and Míriel that Tolkien wrote, but most of that text (and all the associated work in *Laws and Customs among the Eldar*), which represents the bulk of the expanded story of Finwê and Míriel, is omitted. This text was part of a chapter
entitled "Of the Silmarils and the Darkening of Valinor" and had a subheading of "Of Finwë and Míriel" (MR 256). There were then a series of other subheadings, which Tolkien decided to change into separate chapters (see MR 299). All of these new chapters correspond to the chapters in the published Silmarillion, except that the separate chapter entitled "Of Finwë and Míriel" was not included.

In addition to the fourth version of Finwë and Míriel's story, some of the language in this chapter is taken from the essay *Laws and Customs among the Eldar*, and some comes from the first version of Finwë and Míriel's story. There are also portions that come from the "first-phase" version of Chapter 6 in the "later Quenta," and some from the second-phase revisions of that chapter. Most of those second-phase revisions come from a "subchapter" that supplied the name of this chapter, "Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor." However, two paragraphs that are used at the end of this chapter actually are taken from the next subchapter, "Of the Silmarils and the Unrest of the Noldor." Finally, at the end of the chapter there are also a couple of inserts from the *Annals of Aman*. The source materials are traced by paragraph in the table below.

**Source Material by Paragraph for "Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor"**

Note: The fourth version of "Finwë and Míriel" is given in MR 256-63 (with notes and commentary following) and is numbered FM 4 §§1-28. The passages taken from the essay *The Laws and Customs among the Eldar* come from the part of the manuscript that Christopher labels as "A" (which I abbreviate as "L&C A"), given in MR 233-52. The first version of Finwë and Míriel's tale ("FM 1") can be found in MR 205-07. There is also one passage that is taken from the second version of the tale, labeled "FM 2." The portion of Chapter 6, "Of the Silmarils and the Darkening of Valinor," from the first phase of the "later Quenta" that is used in this chapter is LQ §§46-49a is given in MR 184-186, and the relevant second phase revisions to those sections can be found in MR 272-274. Finally, the inserts from the *Annals of Aman* are from AAm §§88, 91, and 92 (MR 93-94).

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<td>&quot;Then Finwë was [...]&quot;</td>
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<td>64</td>
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<td>64</td>
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FM 4 provides the primary source for the first six paragraphs of the chapter. However, the third paragraph ("Míriel was the [...]"; *Silm. 63) has one of the most complex textual histories in the whole book. The paragraph comes mostly from FM 4 §4, but with some language from no less than five additional sources: FM 4 §§3 and 8, LQ §46b, L&C A, and FM 1. I describe the sources of this paragraph in full to give an example of how complex the process sometimes could be.

The first phrase of the first sentence, "Míriel was the name of his mother," comes from both FM 4 §3 and LQ §46b, but the next phrase, "who was called Serindë, because of her surpassing skill in weaving and needlework" comes from L&C A (see MR 236). The last phrase of the sentence, "for her hands were more skilled to fineness than any hands even among the Noldor," comes mainly from L.Q §46b. However, the first word "for" comes from FM 4 §3 replacing "but," and "among" is also inserted from FM 4 §3, replacing "of" (the language in FM 4 §3 is "For her hands were more skilled to make things fine and delicate than any other hands even among the Noldor"). The next sentence and a half, beginning with "The love of" and continuing through "spirit and body," comes from FM 4 §4 (with "Míriel" coming from similar language appearing in L&C A, replacing "she"), but the next phrase, "and after his birth she yearned for release from the labour of living," comes from FM 1 (see MR 206), with "release" changed from "rest" (the phrase "release from the labour of living" actually
appears in FM 4 §8, which has “she yearned not only for sleep and rest but release from the labour of living”). This phrase replaces the phrase from FM 4 §4, “so that almost all strength seemed to have passed from her” (MR 257).

In the fifth paragraph (“It is indeed [...]”; Silm. 64), in which Miriel responds to Finwë’s grief at her exhaustion following the birth of Fëanor, there are two edits that are notable partly for their amusement value. In the first sentence, “It is indeed unhappy” is changed from “Unhappy it is indeed.” Then “Rest now I must. Farewell, dear lord!” is omitted at the end of Miriel’s statement. It appears that, as written by Tolkien, Miriel in her failing days spoke very much like Yoda from Star Wars. Actually, this type of archaic language is common in Tolkien’s work. In an unsent draft of a letter to his friend Hugh Brogan dated September 1955, he defended his use of an archaic narrative style in The Lord of the Rings, including the use of the similar “backwards” construction “Helms too they chose” (see Letters 225-226). (As discussed in the final chapter of the forthcoming Arda Reconstructed, Christopher greatly reduced the use of archaic language in the published Silmarillion.)

The beginning of the seventh paragraph (“All his love [...]”; Silm. 64) continues from FM 4 §9, but the rest of the paragraph comes from LQ §46c. The phrases describing Fëanor as having “piercingly bright” eyes and “raven-dark” hair and saying that he was “in the pursuit of all his purposes eager and steadfast” were added in. Yet Christopher says that the only difference between the original text and the second-phase text is that “Fëanor’s hair is said to have been ‘raven-dark’” (MR 272). I have not been able to locate a source for the statement that his eyes were “piercingly bright,” but I suspect that it might have been part of the same emendation with the “raven-dark” hair that Christopher neglected to mention. The statement “in the pursuit of all his purposes eager and steadfast” is added from FM 4 §22, in which it is stated that “he pursued all his purposes both eagerly and steadfastly.” However, this statement is somewhat contradicted in The Shibboleth of Fëanor, which states, “opposition to his will he met not with the quiet steadfastness of his mother but with fierce resentment. He was restless in mind and body, though like Miriel he could become wholly absorbed in works of the finest skill of hand; but he left many things unfinished” (Peoples of Middle-earth [PoMe] 333).

The following paragraph, which describes Fëanor’s marriage, comes from a second-phase addition Tolkien made at the end of LQ §46c (see MR 272-273). However, significant portions of this material are omitted, with the result of significantly lessening the character development of Fëanor and even more of his wife, Nerdanel.

The first omission consists of three sentences describing Nerdanel. In this omitted passage, it is noted that many were surprised at the union of Fëanor and Nerdanel, because she “was not among the fairest of her people.” She is
described instead as “strong, and free of mind, and filled with the desire of knowledge.” It is further noted that she and Fëanor had met because, like him, she loved to wander by the sea and in the mountains, and that they were companions on many journeys. Another omitted sentence describes how Nerdanel would observe people by “listening to their words, and watching their gestures and the movements of their faces” (MR 272).

These details regarding Fëanor and Nerdanel’s relationship and her character are important, showing that Fëanor was not one to be influenced by surface charms; they give more depth to their relationship by showing how they met and what he saw in her. It is just the kind of character development that would have greatly added to the story. Nerdanel’s character, in particular, would have been much more developed had this material not been deleted.

The statement that Fëanor learned much from his father-in-law, Mahtan, about the making of things in metal and in stone is a complete deviation from the source material. In LQ §46c, it is Nerdanel who is described as learning much from her father about the making of things in metal and in stone, and it goes on to describe the images of the Valar and of others of the Eldar that she had made. They were so lifelike that their friends would speak to them. The passage also speaks of other wonderful things that she made “of her own thought in shapes strong and strange but beautiful” (MR 272).

This change may have been made to match the passage later in the narrative where it is indicated that when Fëanor started making weapons, Mahtan rued the day that he had taught Fëanor the metalwork that Mahtan himself had learned from Aulë. However, I think it is an important detail that he taught these crafts to Nerdanel as well, and that it is unfortunate that Christopher changed the clear meaning of this passage. This is one of the most blatant examples of how Christopher’s changes appear to weaken an important female character.

The next paragraph (“Now it came [...]; Silm. 64-65) resumes from part of FM 4 §23 and the latter part of FM 4 §27. But omitted completely are §§10–22, which describe Finwë’s plea to Manwë and then the Valar’s discussion about what to do about his and Miriel’s situation, and part of §23 through the first half of §27, which deal with how Finwë and Indis came to be together (see MR 258-62).

These extensive deletions are very unfortunate. The omitted material in §§10–22 not only greatly fleshes out the character of Miriel and her pride and

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3 Mahtan is described as a great smith and one those most dear to Aulë (see MR 272 and Silm. 64).

4 This part of the text is closely related to the portion of the Laws and Customs text related to Finwë and Miriel’s story (see MR 233-50).
stubbornness, as well as the nature of love and marriage among the Elves, but also introduces the critical concept of Melkor’s “marrying” of Arda and how death first entered into the world as a result of that marrying. It contains one of the only clear illustrations of the working of the Valar and their governance of Arda, and provides a good example of the interplay between fate and free will (it was ultimately Miriel’s own choice not to return to the living, but Mandos points out to her that this “doom” that she takes upon herself will eventually become grievous not just to her, but to many others). Moreover, had these paragraphs been included, it would have been easier to justify the inclusion of the even more extensive exploration of this material contained in the essay *Laws and Customs among the Eldar* as an appendix.

I cannot accept the argument that including this material would have contrasted too sharply with the surrounding chapters in the level of detail. As stated above, *The Silmarillion* is already full of such contrasts, both before and after this chapter, and including this material would not have significantly increased that. As it stands now, this chapter at fourteen paragraphs and less than four printed pages is one of the shortest in the book. Had the full tale of Finwë and Miriel been included, this chapter still would not have been as long as some of the other chapters in the early part of the book, nor would it have been significantly more detailed than, say, the third chapter, “Of the Coming of the Elves.”

Perhaps Christopher felt that these philosophical concepts were too complex to include. If so, he was both underestimating the audience and doing a disservice to his father’s legacy. Twentieth-century literature is full of works that include significant philosophical diversions.5 While it is true that this material is now available in *Morgoth’s Ring* for those willing to wade through the dense scholarly commentary included in volumes of *The History of Middle-earth,* it was clearly meant by Tolkien to be part of *The Silmarillion,* and the omission of the bulk of Miriel’s story makes it a lesser work.

The omissions from part of §23 through the first half of §27 are also unfortunate. The omission of the description of Indis as “exceedingly swift of foot” from §23 is another small example of the physical lessening of one of the female characters. Also removed from §23 is a description of the ways Indis was unlike Miriel. This is another detail that, in my opinion, should not have been omitted.

The omitted sections 24-26 tell of how Indis had long loved Finwë, of her own sadness, and how the two of them met and healed each other after Indis’s brother Ingwë invited Finwë to spend some time in the full Light of the Trees. Then the portion of FM 4 §27 that was not used in the published text

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5 Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* immediately comes to mind.
describes the wedding of Finwe and Indis, and the rejoicing of the Vanyar and the Noldor. It is a moving story, on a par with such tales as the meeting of Thingol and Melian, or Beren and Luthien, and it should have been included.

Also removed is this warning: "In Indis was first proved true the saying: The loss of one may be the gain of another; but this saying also she found true: The house remembers the builder, though others may dwell in it after" (MR 262). This is a particularly discerning observation, and it is shame that it was not included in the published text.

Finally, a reference to the “five children” of Indis and Finwe is removed. A footnote lists three daughters in addition to the sons Fingolfin and Finarfin (whose names are actually spelled that way): Findis, Finvain, and Faniel.6 However, there is no mention of any of these daughters anywhere in the published Silmarillion (even in the genealogical table in the back). This is another small detail that shows how Christopher lessened the female presence in the tale.

The tenth paragraph ("The wedding of [...]"; Silm. 65) is the last taken from FM 4, with one phrase ("for the sorrow and the strife in the house of Finwe is graven in the memory of the Noldorin Elves") inserted from FM 2 (but very closely based upon L&C A; see MR 239, 265 n. 11). The final four paragraphs are taken mainly from LQ §§46c-49a, mostly (but not entirely) as revised in the second phase.

We then find a curious and unfortunate example of older material replacing the newer version. Both the twelfth and thirteenth paragraphs ("Before the gates [...]" and “Then Manwë granted [...]”; Silm. 65-66) are taken from LQ §48, partly as emended in the second phase, and partly as originally written in the first phase. The passage in which Manwë is shown to have been duped into believing that Melkor was cured because he did not comprehend Melkor’s evil was taken from the older version, replacing a much longer, emended passage. The emended passage acknowledged that Melkor’s evil was beyond full healing, but pointed out that since he was originally the greatest of the powers, his aid would, if he willingly gave it, do more than anything to heal the hurts he had caused. It goes on to state that Manwë judged that this was the path that Melkor was on, that he was treated fairly, and that Manwë was slow to perceive jealousy and rancor, since he himself did not experience these things (see MR 273). Had the emended portion that was not used in the published version been taken up, things would have been a little clearer, and Manwë would not come across to many readers as being quite such a naive simpleton in his dealings with Melkor.

In a final twist, the first two sentences of the last paragraph come from AAm §91. The rest of the paragraph comes from part of the second-phase

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6 In a later text, Tolkien appears to have dropped Finvain and changed Faniel’s name to either “Irime” or “Irien” (see PoMe 343, 359 nn. 26 and 28).
versions of LQ §§49 and 49a, which are actually the beginning of the next "subchapter" of the "later Quenta," "Of the Silmarils and the Unrest of the Noldor," except for another addition from AAm §92, and one from the first-phase version of LQ §49a. It is curious that Christopher would chose to break the chapter at a different place than where his father designated. But this type of thing occurs several times again throughout the book.

And that concludes chapter 6. Christopher’s decisions to omit the bulk of the material on Finwê and Míriel and not include it as a separate chapter, as Tolkien clearly intended, and to remove other significant material regarding Nerdanel and Indis, are very disappointing. The edits in this chapter are some of the most extensive in the entire book, and contribute greatly to the lessening of both the role of female characters and of the philosophical speculations contained therein. It is unlikely that Christopher Tolkien consciously set out to do this, but that is the result of the major omissions and changes made to Tolkien’s final work on this critical part of the story, making The Silmarillion a lesser work. A careful examination of the materials contained in the History of Middle-earth is necessary for a fuller understanding of Tolkien’s purposes and philosophy.

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